

## 2 inventing americas

the making of american literature, 1800-1865

### Making a Nation

There were many who were ready to speak out on behalf of Native Americans, however. And many of these, like those who spoke out in favour of the abolition of slavery or the rights of women, were fired by their belief in a specifically social gospel. In 1790, it has been estimated, only one in twenty Americans was a church member. As a result of a series of religious revivals called the Second Great Awakening, though, by the 1830s about three in four Americans belonged to a church. Most of those churches were evangelical and Protestant; and, although no one church dominated, the Baptist and Methodist groups were predominant. Many of the newly converted subscribed to a faith that emphasized a purely spiritual redemption. If their beliefs had any social implications at all, that was only because they tended to identify the arrival of God's kingdom with the political destiny of the United States. The progress of democracy at home and elsewhere was taken as a measure of progress towards the millennium. But some, at least, believed that the coming of the kingdom of God depended on perfecting human society: by eradicating poverty, alcoholism, discrimination against women, oppressive policies against Native Americans, and, above all, slavery. This was an age of belief, or at the very least the search for belief. Both those who opposed and those who supported slavery claimed to be acting in obedience to God. And when the American AntiSlavery Convention met in 1834, its Declaration certainly invoked the Declaration of Independence, with its thoroughly rationalist allegiance to natural rights. But the authors of that Declaration then went on to distinguish between the founding fathers and their own gathering. 'These principles led them to wage war against their oppressors,' the 'Declaration of the American Anti-Slavery Convention' pointed out, 'and to spill human blood like water in order to be free.' 'Ours forbid the doing of evil that good may come,' it then went on to insist; 'and lead us to reject, and to entreat the oppressed to reject the use of all carnal weapons for deliverance from bondage, relying solely upon those which are spiritual and mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds.' ( gray103)

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the American nation consisted of sixteen states and stretched across one-third of the American continent. By 1853, however, it had achieved the continental dimensions it would keep for over a century, until Alaska and Hawaii were admitted as states. In 1760, the population of the thirteen colonies was slightly more than a million and a half. By 1820, the population of the United States was more than nine and a half million, and by 1860 it had risen to nearly thirty-one and a half million. This was partly the result of the acquisition of new territory: the vast Louisiana territory was purchased from France in 1803, the Florida and Oregon territories (or claims to them) were ceded by Spain and Great Britain, and huge areas in the Southwest were taken from Mexico over a period of thirty years. And it was partly the result of an enormous influx of immigrants. For the first four decades after the Revolution, the number of immigrants was comparatively small and those who came were mostly from the British Isles. Beginning in 1820, though, the stream of immigration rapidly increased, with greatly improved means of ocean transport helping to further the movement of vast multitudes from old worlds to new; and immigrants came from many areas of Europe and the world. The United States was becoming a large and self-confidently, even brazenly, expansionist nation. It was becoming,

too, even more than before, a multicultural one. That met with resistance: the immigration of Irish Catholics in the East, for instance, and Chinese in the West provoked violence and stimulated the growth of political organizations hostile to foreigners. America was changing rapidly, it was sensed, and many did not like it. The real change, however, the one that was most radical and potentially troubling, had little to do with growth in the size and diversity of the population. The change that really mattered, and perhaps unnerved, was an economic one. The economic base of the country was shifting from agriculture to industry, and its population was moving from the country to the town. The changes in transportation taking place in the United States during this period are particularly striking here, since they illustrate the economic shift and facilitated it. In 1800, if Americans travelled in their country at all, they travelled by wagon or water, and, if by water, their vessels were propelled by current, sail or oar. Seven years later, the first steamboat appeared on an American waterway. Far more important, twenty-three years after that, in 1830, the first locomotive was manufactured in the United States; it reached the staggering speed of twelve miles an hour and lost a race with a horse. Ten years after this, in turn, in 1840, there were roughly as many miles of railroad track as there were miles of canals: 3,328, all built in the previous twenty-five years. And by 1860, there were no fewer than 30,000 miles of track. What Walt Whitman called 'type of the modern', the age of the railroad, had definitely arrived. Rail transformed trade and travel. It encouraged farmers to produce cash crops, on ever larger agricultural units, for market. It allowed labourers to go where the demand for their labour was. It stimulated the growth of a whole new range of industries, among them lumbering, mining and the production of machine tools. And it also indirectly promoted immigration, since immigrants were among those who notionally benefited from a more mobile labour market and vastly increased, significantly more fluid systems of production and consumption. In short, the railroads were at once an agent and paradigm, an enabler and an emblem, of a newer, more powerful and expansionist America. If there was any change for African Americans, however, it was for the worse. All hope some of the founding fathers might have had, that slavery would die out or slaves gradually be freed, was extinguished by the invention of the cotton gin, and the vast expansion in the demand for cotton in Great Britain. Slavery was a profitable enterprise, so was the breeding of slaves; and, if anything, the living standards of slaves during this period deteriorated, their working and general conditions grew harsher. Laws against teaching slaves to read and write began to be rigorously enforced; opportunities for slaves to acquire a trade or hire out their time, and so perhaps buy their freedom eventually, began to disappear. A whole series of political compromises, meant to resolve the differences between slaveholding and free states, seemed likely to cement the status quo and postpone the different possibilities Jefferson had sketched out for emancipation indefinitely. So did the insistence of the Southern states that they had the right to define the social forms existing within their borders, without any federal interference. Three events, occurring in 1831, were pivotal. A slave insurrection led by Nat Turner succeeded briefly in Virginia; the Virginia legislature actually discussed a proposal for freeing all slaves within state borders only to reject it; and William Lloyd Garrison founded the anti-slavery journal, *The Liberator*. The growth of the abolitionist movement and the fear of slave insurrection, the sense of enemies without and within, encouraged the South to close ranks to defend its peculiar institution. The 1831 debate in Virginia turned out to be the last time the

abolition of slavery was given such a public airing below the Mason-Dixon line. From then on, there would be increasingly urgent demands for abolition from the North, from writers both black and white, and an increasingly virulent defence of slavery and states rights from spokespeople from the South. And a path was opened up to civil war. For Native Americans, this was also a period of change for the worse. The policy of the United States was a simple one: removal. Under the terms of the 1830 Removal Act, tribes gave up their lands east of the Mississippi for land to the west. 'Their cultivated fields; their constructed habitations . . . are undoubtedly by the law of nature theirs,' conceded John Quincy Adams, president from 1825 to 1829, 'but what is the right of the huntsman to the forest of a thousand miles which he has accidentally ranged in quest of prey?' As it happened, this was a distinction without a difference as far as practical policy was concerned. The Cherokees of Georgia and North Carolina turned themselves into a successful farming people and, in 1827, even adopted a constitution for themselves modelled on that of the United States. It was no use. They, too, were forced to move west, following what became known as the 'Trail of Tears' to the remote, infertile Oklahoma territory. At least four thousand of them died, either in the concentration camps where they were assembled for deportation or during the removal itself. By 1844, most tribes had been removed west. But even there they were not safe. The rapid westward movement of population, which in 1828 led to the election of the first president from a region west of the Appalachians, Andrew Jackson, meant that whites soon wanted some or most of the land to which the Native American peoples had been removed. Jackson had claimed that his policy of removal would put the tribes 'beyond the reach of injury and oppression' and under the 'paternal care of the General Government'. In fact, the policy of the government now turned towards concentrating them in ever smaller reservations. Another president, William Henry Harrison, who served briefly in 1841, summed up the thinking that subjected Native Americans during this period to dispossession and decimation. 'Is one of the fairest portions of the globe to remain in a state of nature, the haunt of a few wretched savages,' he asked, 'when it seems destined by the Creator to give support to a large population and to be the seat of civilisation?' The question was in every sense a rhetorical one since it was clear, from their policies, what the answer of successive governments was. There were many who were ready to speak out on behalf of Native Americans, however. And many of these, like those who spoke out in favour of the abolition of slavery or the rights of women, were fired by their belief in a specifically social gospel. In 1790, it has been estimated, only one in twenty Americans was a church member. As a result of a series of religious revivals called the Second Great Awakening, though, by the 1830s about three in four Americans belonged to a church. Most of those churches were evangelical and Protestant; and, although no one church dominated, the Baptist and Methodist groups were predominant. Many of the newly converted subscribed to a faith that emphasized a purely spiritual redemption. If their beliefs had any social implications at all, that was only because they tended to identify the arrival of God's kingdom with the political destiny of the United States. The progress of democracy at home and elsewhere was taken as a measure of progress towards the millennium. But some, at least, believed that the coming of the kingdom of God depended on perfecting human society: by eradicating poverty, alcoholism, discrimination against women, oppressive policies against Native Americans, and, above all, slavery. This was an age of belief, or at the very least the search for

belief. Both those who opposed and those who supported slavery claimed to be acting in obedience to God. And when the American AntiSlavery Convention met in 1834, its Declaration certainly invoked the Declaration of Independence, with its thoroughly rationalist allegiance to natural rights. But the authors of that Declaration then went on to distinguish between the founding fathers and their own gathering. 'These principles led them to wage war against their oppressors,' the 'Declaration of the American Anti-Slavery Convention' pointed out, 'and to spill human blood like water in order to be free.' 'Ours forbid the doing of evil that good may come,' it then went on to insist; 'and lead us to reject, and to entreat the oppressed to reject the use of all carnal weapons for deliverance from bondage, relying solely upon those which are spiritual and mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds.' There was a split in the anti-slavery movement on the use of violence, however. There were those, like John Brown, who believed that violent action was necessary to end ignorance and evil: even when that action was regarded as treason or insurrection, an offence against the state. There were also those, like Henry David Thoreau, who were willing to support such action. Thoreau was even willing to compare John Brown to Jesus. 'The same indignation that is said to have cleared the temple once will clear it again,' Thoreau declared. 'The question is not about the weapon, but the spirit in which you use it.' There was a split in the women's movement too, although of a very different kind. On the one hand, there were those like Catharine Beecher who believed in separate 'spheres' for men and women. Along with her sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, she argued that a woman had the responsibility, and the privilege, to sustain and instil domestic female values as an alternative to the competitive, and frequently ruthless, principles of the marketplace that more and more governed the life of man. On the other, there were women like Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Cady Stanton who argued that separation meant demotion for women, since the spheres were essentially unequal. In response to Beecher's argument, that running a household requires expertise equal to that of a lawyer or a doctor, they insisted that women could and should be lawyers or doctors if they wanted to be – that, indeed, they might take up any activity or profession as long as they had the talent and the commitment. Fuller and Stanton were arguing against the economic and cultural trends of the time, however, since women were still confined to very limited spheres of activity. Poorer white women were forced into menial jobs if they lived in town; they constituted much of the workforce for the new industries, the mills and sweatshops. Middle-class white women usually enjoyed better educational opportunities while they were young. More went to school, a substantial number went on to college, most could enjoy the increasing number of books and magazines available. But, once educated, if they did not want to enter the sphere of domesticity, there were few professions available to them. One of the few available options, in fact, was to become a writer. The option was there, in part, because of the huge growth in publishing outlets. The United States had one of the most literate populations in the world at this time. Eager for entertainment and information, Americans flocked to the lectures and debates held at debating societies and lyceums. The lecture circuit attracted literary personalities from abroad, like Charles Dickens, and local cultural luminaries such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. It also drew those, like the abolitionists and feminists, who wished to speak on behalf of a cause. Americans also turned to newspapers, magazines and books in increasing numbers. Newspapers proliferated – there were 1,200 by 1830 – so did magazines; and

many writers of this period learned their trade or earned their living as editors. William Cullen Bryant and Walt Whitman both ran newspapers. Edgar Allan Poe, Margaret Fuller, Frederick Douglass and Nathaniel Hawthorne were among many to edit magazines. Some of the newspapers gave a voice to the underprivileged or dispossessed. The Cherokee Phoenix, set up in 1828, was the first paper published by an Indian tribe and the first to appear in a native language as well as English. One year earlier, Freedom's Journal started to appear, the first of seventeen newspapers owned and edited by African Americans to be published before the Civil War. Other, more mainstream publications gave women, in particular, a chance to earn a living and shape taste. Sara Josepha Hale (1788-1879), for example, became editor of one of the most influential magazines of the period, Godey's Lady's Book. The absence of an international copyright law until 1891 certainly mitigated against American writers supporting themselves by their writing, since it meant that the market could be flooded with cheap pirated editions of famous British authors. Still, many tried and some succeeded in living, partly or entirely, by the products of their pen. One of the memorable features of the period, in fact, is the number of women who turned to writing, for income and self-expression. In the process, they established a tradition of work that is on the whole more realistic and domestic than the mythic, romantic fiction of, say, Poe, Hawthorne and Herman Melville: a tradition that focuses on community and family, and uses sentiment to explore fundamental social and moral issues. Another, equally remarkable feature of the time is just how many of the best-sellers were written by women: *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) by Susan Warner (1819-85) (which was the first American novel to sell more than a million copies), *The Lamplighter* (1854) by Maria Cummins (1827-66), *The Hidden Hand* (1859) by E. D. E. N. Southworth (1819-99), and, of course, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Some women writers may have felt it necessary to deprecate their literary works. Some concealed their identities behind pen names. Others, like Mary E. Bryan in 'How Should Women Write' (1860), complained that men tried to restrict women to 'the surface of life', telling them that 'with metaphysics, they have nothing to do' - advising women writers that they should not 'grapple with those great social and moral problems with which every strong soul is now wrestling', then condemning their efforts, should they follow such advice, as 'tame and commonplace'. Still, women made a vital and significant contribution to the popularity of imaginative writing during this time, and, even more, to its quality.